

Decoding China's New “National Security Commission”

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CNA CHINA  STUDIES



CPP-2013-U-006465-Final
November 2013

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE NOV 2013		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2013 to 00-00-2013	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Decoding China's New 'National Security Commission'				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) CNA Analysis & Solutions, 4825 Mark Center Drive, Alexandria, VA, 22311				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 16	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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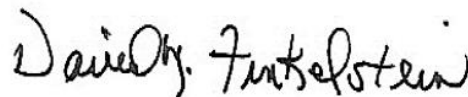
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November 2013

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Decoding China's New "National Security Commission"

Joel Wuthnow*

Executive summary

On November 12, 2013, the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced the creation of a new "National Security Commission." Although few details were offered, PRC official sources and commentary by senior PRC security experts provide insight into its purpose and expected achievements. These include:

- *Resolving security policy coordination problems, including reducing "stove-piping" in China's bureaucratic system.*
- *Steering policy at a high level. This includes discussion about whether foreign NSCs might be a useful model in the Chinese context.*
- *Addressing a wide array of domestic and international security challenges, ranging from terrorism to the U.S. rebalance to Asia.*

Overall, there were high expectations that China's new "NSC" would be able to confront these challenges. Nevertheless, a number of key analytic issues remain, including those related to the body's leadership, links to other institutions, authority, and scope of responsibilities. Further monitoring and analysis of these issues is necessary.

Introduction

On November 12, 2013, PRC media reported on the establishment of a new "National Security Commission" (*guojia anquan weiyuanhui*; 国家安全委员会) in China.¹ The decision was reached during the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which was held in Beijing on November 9–12. The Third Plenum considered a wide range of economic, social, and political reforms, in addition to addressing items related to security and national defense.²

To date, the only publicly available authoritative statement about the new body is contained in a single sentence in the Third Plenum's official report, *The CPC Central Committee Decision on Deepening of Reforms*, which declared that China would "establish a National Security

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Commission and perfect national security systems and strategies in order to ensure national security.”³

Indeed, official PRC sources were silent on a number of key issues: who would sit on and staff the commission, what authority it would have to make decisions, what its links to existing bodies (such as the military) would be, and what issues it would be expected to address. This vacuum was quickly filled with speculation, notably in Hong Kong media.⁴

Nevertheless, some important remarks about the commission were included in a second document released during the Third Plenum, titled *Xi Jinping’s Explanation of the CPC Central Committee Decision on Several Major Issues on the Comprehensive Deepening of Reforms*.⁵ Additional analysis by several senior PRC security affairs specialists appeared in PRC media outlets in the days following the announcement. These sources offer insight into the reasons that the commission was established, and the expectations of what it should be able to accomplish.

Based on these sources, one thing is evident: there are high expectations within China that the new body will be able to address a broad array of institutional and policy challenges. These include improving coordination between bureaucracies, guiding policy from a high level, and confronting a wide variety of internal and external security problems.

This essay discusses these themes. It concludes with some thoughts about key analytic issues that will require further attention in the months and years ahead.

Key themes in PRC commentary

General Secretary Xi Jinping’s *Explanation* and commentary by senior PRC security experts highlighted three major reasons for establishing a National Security Commission.

1. Addressing policy coordination problems

First, PRC sources suggested that the National Security Commission was created to rectify problems of policy coordination among China’s security bureaucracies and provide strong, centralized leadership over national security affairs.⁶ According to Xi Jinping’s *Explanation*,

Since our security work systems and mechanisms still do not meet the requirements of strengthening national security, we need to build a strong and powerful platform for making unified plans for national security work. Establishing a National Security Commission has become urgent now in order to strengthen centralized, unified leadership over national security work.⁷

An opinion piece in the overseas edition of the CPC’s official mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, offered additional details about the coordination deficiencies of the current system:

The current leading groups and their offices for foreign affairs, national security, and anti-terror work under the CPC Central Committee are characterized by their non-official and provisional nature. It is difficult for them to track, analyze, and coordinate routine affairs as the core organs for [the] state’s security affairs. They also lack enough manpower and resources to respond to [a] sudden outbreak of contingencies as well as to

formulate, coordinate, and supervise the implementation of national security strategies of [a] comprehensive nature.⁸

Several PRC security affairs specialists asserted that the new commission should be able to ameliorate the above challenges. For instance, Ruan Zongze, vice president of the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), a research organ of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued on China Central Television that the new body would “help to coordinate the previous fragmented security organs in order to better deal with threats.”⁹ Gao Zugui, a researcher at the Central Party School, also noted that evolving threats facing China require that “all departments in all areas strengthen coordination, which demands an organization to play a coordinating role.”¹⁰

Moreover, some PRC experts held high expectations that the new organ would be able to reduce the problem of “stove-piping” in the Chinese system. As Senior Colonel Li Daguang of China’s National Defense University (NDU) argued in a Xinhua article, the commission would “eliminate the problems of non-communication and non-coordination,” and become a “pillar” of national security decision-making and coordination.¹¹ Likewise, Qu Xing, president of CIIS, said that the commission would “facilitate the work of national security and overall planning, unify and coordinate actions, and concentrate resources.”¹²

Despite assertions that China should enhance policy coordination, there were no details in PRC commentary about *how*, specifically, the new body would be able to do so. For example, it did not propose a way to reduce the barriers that obstruct quick and accurate transmission of information. Nevertheless, it was clear that PRC observers expected that the new commission should, and could, address such problems.

2. Steering policy at a high level

Second, PRC commentary emphasized that the new National Security Commission should set and implement national security policies from a high level. Xi Jinping’s *Explanation* enumerated four responsibilities for the body:

- Establishing and implementing national security strategy
- Promoting the construction of national security law
- Formulating principles and policies for national security work
- Studying ways to resolve major problems in national security work.¹³

Several PRC security analysts also asserted that a purpose of the commission would be to steer national security policy. For instance, Wang Honggang, deputy director of the Institute of America Studies at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), wrote that “there has to be a central planning and command body with the authority to further strengthen the country’s strategic initiatives and its security capabilities.”¹⁴ Gao Zugui of the Central Party School likewise argued for a structure that would “be superior to existing bureaucracies and systems,” and that would “establish and implement policy from a high level.”¹⁵

“Many countries, including the United States, Russia, India and the United Kingdom, have set up national security bodies according to their own security needs. So, China's decision to set up a National Security Commission is a pragmatic initiative that will enable it to draw on the experiences of others as it seeks to address its own particular security challenges.”

— CICIR scholar Wang Honggang on the reference value of other countries' national security councils for China's new committee.

(Wang Honggang, “Necessary Guarantee for Reform,” *China Daily* Online, 19 November 2013)

The existence of high-level coordinating mechanisms in other major countries was also a focus of PRC commentary. For instance, Gao Li, a scholar at the Central Party School, argued in *People's Daily* that China's new commission was “in keeping with standard international practice,” noting that “great powers, such as the United States typically have this type of organ.”¹⁶ Wu Dahui, a professor at Tsinghua University, similarly explained that France and the United States both have “high-level security mechanisms,” and that it was a “natural process” for the PRC to desire its own similar body to coordinate policy between various departments.¹⁷

However, others alluded to potential differences between China's commission and other countries' mechanisms. Gong Fangbin, a professor at China's NDU wrote in a *People's Daily* online forum that there would be “large differences” between China's and “western countries” national security councils or their

equivalents, since “we are a country under the leadership of a Communist Party,” and “Party Central will continue to have the highest decision-making power.”¹⁸ In addition, Senior Colonel Xu Hui, another NDU scholar, stated more circumspectly that “different countries have differing systems, and the roles and statutes of all NSCs are different.”¹⁹ Similarly, a Xinhua analysis asserted that such comparisons to other NSCs were for “reference purposes only.”²⁰

In short, PRC sources agreed that China should have the ability to set and execute security policy from a high level, but offered differing perspectives on whether there was a suitable model for how to do so.

3. Responding to foreign and domestic security challenges

Third, PRC sources described a wide range of domestic and foreign security challenges that the new commission may have to address. Xi Jinping's *Explanation* argued that:

[China] faces the dual pressure of safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests *externally* and safeguarding political security and social stability *internally*; all kinds of predictable and unpredictable risk factors have significantly increased.²¹

PRC commentary added detail to the types of internal and external challenges that may require attention by the new body. For instance, in a lengthy article in *Study Times* (*Xuexi Shibao*; 学习时报), the official journal of the Central Party School, Major General Li Shengquan of China's NDU described five key problems:

- “The international system has entered a period of rapid changes and deepening adjustments, and international security risks and variables have grown.”

- “China’s national interests have quickly expanded overseas,” and those interests are increasingly “unstable” and “uncertain.”
- “The United States has strategically rebalanced to the Asia-Pacific,” and threats “around China’s borders, especially from the maritime direction” have grown.
- China’s “political security” and “national sovereignty” are facing the challenges of “terrorism,” “separatism,” and “extremism.”
- External intelligence activities and other foreign threats to China’s internal security have increased “along with the spread of information and network technology.”²²

Other senior PRC researchers also discussed a wide range of security challenges in the context of the new commission. First, Luo Yuan, a retired major general who frequently espouses hawkish views in the Chinese media, pointed to border and maritime disputes, as well as efforts by “some major country” to “contain China’s rise,” as important changes driving the need for the new body.²³ Second, Qu Xing, president of CIIS, flagged problems such as proliferation; the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism; and the “increasingly multi-faceted intelligence activities” that other countries conduct against China.²⁴ Third, Shan Chunchang, who was described as director of the PRC State Council’s “emergency management experts committee,” suggested that China’s “NSC” would have a role in responding to “sudden incidents,” including “large-scale disasters.”²⁵

In addition, some PRC analysts suggested that the new body could not focus purely on either domestic or foreign issues, since the two are often linked. For instance, Li Wei, a scholar at CICIR, argued that the commission would be involved in both types of issues, spanning the areas of public security, national defense, foreign policy, economic security, and maritime issues, and “would not be limited to domestic issues.”²⁶ The Central Party School’s Gao Zugui similarly contended that there was “no clear boundary” between internal and external security issues, and that the commission would have to address both.²⁷

Managing the Taiwan issue

In addition to other matters, one PRC scholar suggested that the commission might be involved in managing Taiwan policy. According to Wang Jianmin, a researcher in the Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Taiwan is a “major national security issue involving national sovereignty,” and the new committee will be responsible for “carefully managing” and “setting correct policies” for the Taiwan issue.

(“Wang Jianmin: Establishing a National Security Commission Will Effectively Contain ‘Taiwan Independence’ Separatist Movements,” *Huaxia Jingwei* Online, 21 November 2013)

In sum, Chinese commentary assumed that the new commission might be called on to address a remarkably wide array of problems, ranging from terrorism to the strategic challenge of the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

Key uncertainties

As suggested above, PRC sources provide important context on the establishment of a national security commission. Xi Jinping's *Explanation* and commentary by senior PRC researchers indicate that the new commission would be needed in order to address a wide range of institutional and policy challenges – and that there were high expectations that the body would be able to do so.

However, important details on several aspects of the commission were lacking. These gaps include the following:

- ***Leadership***

There were uncertainties about the commission's leadership and, in particular, the level of Xi Jinping's personal involvement. The nature of Xi's role could have major implications for the body's authority to reach and execute decisions. As NDU's Senior Colonel Xu Hui explains, if the country's "highest leader" were a member of the commission, it would serve as China's "highest decision-making organ" for national security. However, if it were led by "other senior leaders," it might only serve as a "decision-making advisory organ."²⁸ Other leadership arrangements (for instance, whether the commission would include a position equivalent to "national security advisor") were also uncertain.

- ***Status of the National Security Leading Small Group***

No official announcement was made regarding the implications of the new "NSC" for China's current security policy coordination mechanism, known as the National Security Leading Small Group (*guojia anquan lingdao xiaozu*; 国家安全领导小组), or NSLSG.²⁹ This body was established in 2000 and chaired successively by prior general secretaries Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. It is still unknown whether that body will remain a distinct entity or be subsumed into the new organ. In addition, questions remained about the role of the Foreign Affairs Office of the CPC Central Committee, which is responsible for staffing the NSLSG, and its director (formerly Dai Bingguo).

- ***Links to the military***

The relationship between the new commission and the PLA was also unclear. Key questions include how the PLA will be represented on the commission; how authority will be divided between the commission and the Central Military Commission; and how far the commission's scope of responsibilities will overlap with the military's own bureaucratic "lane in the road," especially in light of the PLA's focus on safeguarding an increasingly wide range of national interests.³⁰ These questions were not addressed in official sources or in PLA commentary following the Third Plenum; however, answers to them would help clarify the role of the PLA in national security decision-making under Xi Jinping.

- ***Rapid transmission of information***

As discussed above, the expectation within China's security community was that the new body would help alleviate problems of "stove-piping" within the Chinese system. However, no details were provided on the specific ways in which timely and accurate information would be shared among PRC bureaucracies, or between those departments and top leaders. For instance, it was unclear what channels the PLA would use to share its own information with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the commission's ability to rectify this problem could have significant implications for China's ability to respond quickly and effectively to future foreign or domestic crises.³¹

- ***Domestic vs. international focus***

A final uncertainty concerns the commission's mandate. Analysis by several U.S.-based scholars concluded that the commission would focus on internal security matters.³² Indeed, the commission was discussed in a section of the Third Plenum *Decision* on internal stability challenges.³³ However, Xi Jinping's *Explanation* and other PRC commentary note a variety of foreign and domestic problems requiring the creation of a new committee. In addition, as some PRC security experts contend, there may not be clear internal vs. external divisions on some issues, such as terrorism and proliferation. Thus, in the absence of authoritative facts to the contrary, it would be premature to conclude that the body will be limited to addressing any particular set of issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, China's new National Security Commission raises a number of key analytic issues, including questions related to its leadership, staffing, authority, functions, and scope of responsibilities. It is possible that several key decisions have yet to be made. It is also possible that some key decisions have been made but not released to the public. In addition, it is important to consider that, if the experiences of other countries' NSCs are a guide, the body may evolve in ways far different from how it was originally conceived.³⁴ For now, it is important to continue to assess the development of the commission via official sources and discourses within China's security community.

Notes

¹ Initial Xinhua reports translated the name of the body as the “State Security Committee.” However, some later reports used the translation “National Security Commission.” For consistency, this essay adopts the later translation; however, it remains to be seen whether that translation will hold in official PRC accounts.

² For a brief assessment of the Third Plenum and its achievement, see: Christopher Johnson, “China Announces Sweeping Reform Agenda at Plenum,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 November 2013, <http://csis.org/publication/china-announces-sweeping-reform-agenda-plenum>.

³ “CPC Central Committee Decision on Deepening of Reforms,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013. In addition, it is worth noting that the idea of establishing an NSC-like organization within China had reportedly been considered for several years. Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, noted that the idea had “been floating around in China’s think tanks for quite a few years, spurred on by what analysts see as insufficient interagency foreign policy coordination, especially in managing international crises.” See: Nina Hachigian, ed., *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 18.

⁴ See, for instance, “Expert: Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Public Security, and General Staff Department Will Be Represented on the National Security Committee,” *Ta Kung Pao*, 13 November 2013, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2013-11/2033883.html>.

⁵ This document should be read not as Xi Jinping’s personal views but as the collective position of the Central Committee. It was intended to further explain decisions reached during the Third Plenum. “Xi Jinping: Explanation Related to *The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Several Problems of Fully Deepening Reform*,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/15/c_118164294.htm.

⁶ Indeed, problems of coordination within China’s national security decision-making process have been noted by several U.S.-based observers. See: David M. Finkelstein, *Commentary on China’s External Grand Strategy* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2009); Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortel, *Chinese National Decision-Making Under Stress* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2005); and Yun Sun, “Chinese National Security Decision-Making: Processes and Challenges,” The Brookings Institution, May 2013.

⁷ “Xi Jinping: Explanation Related to *The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Several Problems of Fully Deepening Reform*,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/15/c_118164294.htm.

⁸ Hua Yiwen, “Squeeze Five Fingers on National Security,” *People’s Daily* (Overseas Edition), 13 November 2013.

⁹ See: <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/11/13/VIDE1384353122424699.shtml>.

¹⁰ “Gao Zugui: National Security Committee Brings Major Changes In Scope and Connotation,” *People’s Daily Online*, Great Power Forum, 14 November 2013, <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c1011-23544511.html>.

¹¹ “Experts Demystify China’s National Security Committee, Standard Configuration of Strong Powers,” China News Service, 14 November 2013, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/11-14/5499845.shtml>.

¹² “Experts: Establishing a National Security Committee Raises the Level of National Security Coordination,” *People’s Daily Online*, 12 November 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1112/c148980-23518980.html>.

¹³ “Xi Jinping: Explanation Related to *The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Several Problems of Fully Deepening Reform*,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/15/c_118164294.htm.

¹⁴ Wang Honggang, “Necessary Guarantee for Reform,” *China Daily Online*, 19 November 2013.

¹⁵ “Gao Zugui: National Security Committee Brings Major Changes In Scope and Connotation,” *People’s Daily Online*, Great Power Forum, 14 November 2013, <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c1011-23544511.html>.

¹⁶ “Experts: Establishing a National Security Committee Raises the Level of National Security Coordination,” *People’s Daily* Online, 12 November 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1112/c148980-23518980.html>.

¹⁷ “Focus Today,” China Central Television, 13 November 2013, <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/11/13/VIDE1384353122424699.shtml>.

¹⁸ “NDU’s Gong Fangbin: National Security Committee Carries the Duty of Resolving the ‘Trouble of Rising Powers,’” *People’s Daily* Online, Great Power Forum, 14 November 2013, <http://www.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c347407-23539919.html>.

¹⁹ “Experts Demystify China’s National Security Committee, Standard Configuration of Strong Powers,” China News Service, 14 November 2013, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/11-14/5499845.shtml>.

²⁰ “Experts Demystify China’s National Security Committee, Standard Configuration of Strong Powers,” China News Service, 14 November 2013, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/11-14/5499845.shtml>.

²¹ “Xi Jinping: Explanation Related to *The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Several Problems of Fully Deepening Reform*,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/15/c_118164294.htm. Emphasis added.

²² Li Shengquan, “Establishing a National Security Commission, a Strategic Decision for National Security Coordination,” *Study Times*, 18 November 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1118/c40531-23575773.html>.

²³ “Luo Yuan: Reality Calling is the ‘Birth Agent’ of China’s National Security Committee,” *Global Times* Online, 14 November 2013, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2013-11/4565688.html>.

²⁴ “Experts: Establishing a National Security Committee Raises the Level of National Security Coordination,” *People’s Daily* Online, 12 November 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1112/c148980-23518980.html>.

²⁵ The report did not offer any additional details about this committee. “State Council Advisor Shan Chunchang: Improve Risk Assessments, Transform from Disaster Relief to Disaster Prevention,” *People’s Daily* Online, 18 November 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1118/c1027-23578552.html>

²⁶ “Expert: National Security Committee Will Combine Internal and External Duties, and Will Make Terrorists Nervous,” *Beijing Times*, 14 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2013-11/14/c_125699671.htm.

²⁷ “Gao Zugui: National Security Committee Brings Major Changes In Scope and Connotation,” *People’s Daily* Online, Great Power Forum, 14 November 2013, <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c1011-23544511.html>.

²⁸ “Experts Demystify China’s National Security Committee, Standard Configuration of Strong Powers,” China News Service, 14 November 2013, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/11-14/5499845.shtml>.

²⁹ This body was reportedly established in 2000 and shared an identical membership with another body, the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. For further details, see: Alice Miller, “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor* No. 26, Fall 2008.

³⁰ For additional analysis of the role of the PLA in national security decision-making and civil-military relations, see: David Finkelstein, “The PLA, the Party, and the State: Civil-Military Relations Under the New Leadership,” unpublished CNA paper, February 2013, cited with the permission of the author.

³¹ For analysis of PRC policy coordination in the context of previous crises, see: Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortel, *Chinese National Decision-Making Under Stress* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2005).

³² Evidence for this assertion included (1) the PRC rendering of the committee’s name as the “National Security Commission,” as opposed to the “National Security Committee” and (2) comments by a Foreign Ministry spokesman that the new committee’s establishment would make terrorists, separatists, and extremists “nervous.” See: Yun Sun, “PacNet #81 – China’s New ‘National Security Commission’: Questions Ahead,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 14 November 2013, <http://csis.org/publication/pacnet-81-chinas-new-state-security->

[committee-questions-ahead](#); Gregory Kulacki, “China’s New Security Committee,” *All Things Nuclear* blog, Union of Concerned Scientists, 13 November 2013, <http://allthingsnuclear.org/chinas-new-security-committee/>; and Samantha Hoffman and Peter Mattis, “Inside China’s New Security Council,” *The National Interest*, 21 November 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/inside-chinas-new-security-council-9439>.

³³ “CPC Central Committee Decision on Deepening of Reforms,” Xinhua, 15 November 2013.

³⁴ For an analysis of the evolution of the U.S. National Security Council, see: David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006).



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